

# ART OF SURVIVAL

Rithy Panh's tale of personal tragedy under the Khmer Rouge regime is an exercise in creative catharsis, writes **Jane Cornwell**

**A**s a survivor of the Cambodian genocide of the late 1970s, Rithy Panh knew he had two choices. He could remain silent about the brutal Khmer Rouge regime that under dictator Pol Pot is estimated to have killed a quarter of the country's population, including most of Panh's family. Or he could set about blasting a light on one of the worst mass killings of the 20th century, thereby promoting healing, restoring dignity and increasing awareness — and working to break a cycle that seems doomed to be repeated unless addressed.

Silence was never an option; at least not permanently. "There is no virtue in keeping quiet, because you will never forget," says the 53-year-old film director, screenwriter and author in his fluent, accented English.

"I'm often asked why I keep digging at my pain, but it is more than that. I want to understand who were the victims and who were the perpetrators. I want to pay my debt to those who helped me survive. I mean, why me? Why not my mother and father?"

Over the course of a long and internationally acclaimed career, Panh has made several films about the killing fields, the medieval-style labour camps intended to "re-educate" the Cambodian people in keeping with a twisted brand of revolutionary socialism championed by an oligarchy of tyrants. From 1975, when power was seized by the Khmer Rouge (the followers of the Communist Party of Kampuchea), to 1979, when the regime was overthrown by invading Vietnamese troops, up to two million people died from execution, malnutrition, disease and overwork. Most were buried in shallow mass graves, unidentified, unhonoured.

"It comes like a big wave that can swallow you," Panh, a married father of one, has said of his grief. "But you continue because you have to transmit not the horror but the dignity and humanity of the people who died ... An artist brings more than testimony: he brings imagination, creation, the idea [of] how to fight against totalitarianism."

It is a sunny day in Paris, to where Panh has recently returned from Los Angeles after completing production duties on *First They Killed My Father*, a Netflix biopic in Khmer,

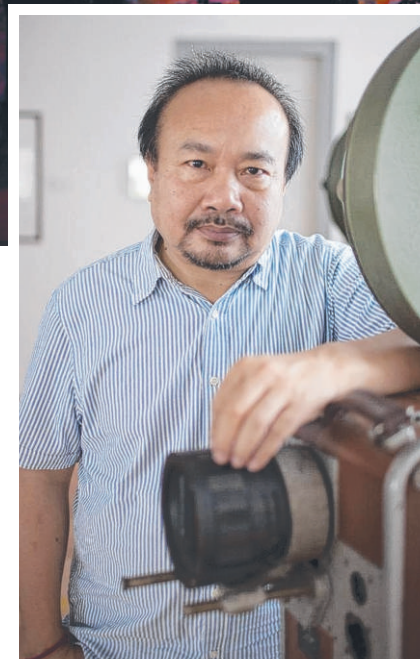
adapted from a 2000 memoir by former Khmer Rouge child soldier Loung Ung, and directed by Panh's friend Angelina Jolie. Outside the window of our meeting place, an upmarket hotel bar on Place de la Republique, everyday life bustles; when not hard at work in the French capital, or ensconced at his other base in Phnom Penh, Panh likes to don his trademark fedora and walk the streets, mulling over future projects, revelling in the ordinary.

We're here to talk about *A Requiem for Cambodia: Bangsokol*, a multimedia spectacular fusing music, voice, movement and projected imagery that has its world premiere at the Melbourne Festival this month. Themed around the ceremony that traditionally accompanies Buddhist funeral rites, involving placing a white cloth over the body (most Cambodians believe the dead cannot rest or be reincarnated without proper rituals), *Bangsokol* is variously a mourning ritual, a paean to Cambodian culture past and present, and an artistic celebration of the fact that, whatever happens, life goes on.

With the prominent Cambodian composer Him Sophy, Panh is principal creator of a project being hailed as the first major symphonic work to come out of Cambodia since Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge. A Western orchestra and six-piece ensemble on traditional instruments including flute, xylophone and the thousand-year-old Khmer harp are to deliver Sophy's tradi-modern score; a triptych backdrop will feature excerpts from Panh's films and historical footage reaffirming the ancient roots of Cambodian civilisation.

Art, music and culture were anathema to the fanatics of the Khmer Rouge. Reading, speaking other languages, even wearing glasses could get you killed. "Very few artists survived," says Panh. "Him Sophy was one. I was another. Him went to study in Moscow. I came to France. We met in Phnom Penh [where Sophy founded a music school in 2013] when I asked him to improvise a film soundtrack with an orchestra. He told me about this requiem project he started 20 years ago but for various reasons, including illness, had put on hold."

Having workshoped the requiem in New York in 2013, at a large-scale Cambodian festival initiated by Phnom Penh-based organis-



## I DID NOT KILL MY FATHER. IDEOLOGY DID

RITHY PANH

ation Cambodian Living Arts, and mindful that Cambodia lacked the infrastructure for a project of this scope, Sophy and CLA reached out to international collaborators. US-born Southeast Asian Buddhist scholar Trent Walker agreed to write the libretto. Jewish-Australian director and choreographer (and Melbourne Festival associate) Gideon Obarzanek became director of staging, assisted by Cambodian classical dancer Chumvan "Belle" Sodhachiv. The work was put together in a university theatre in Taipei, with the Taipei Philharmonic Orchestra and Chamber Choir accompanying the first full rehearsal (the world premiere will feature an orchestra created in Melbourne).

"Early on we rehearsed in a high-school hall in Phnom Penh, using the students as extras," says Obarzanek. "My role has been to find a language to speak across film, movement, music, and make everyone in the theatre feel like they have some involvement in this ritual, rather than just sitting there in the dark. It's been an interesting and at times challenging process."

But ultimately a rewarding one: after premiering at the Arts Centre Melbourne, *Bangsokol* will head to New York and Boston in December before appearing across Europe and Asia next year. It will reach Phnom Penh in 2019, coinciding with the 40th anniversary of the fall of the Khmer Rouge.

"I thought, OK, this is something never before seen in Cambodia, something that can

empower the next generation," says Panh, who in 2006 established the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Centre, a hub in Phnom Penh offering training in multimedia and filmmaking, and free access to a large documentary database.

In a country where 70 per cent of the populace is younger than 30, and with the previous artistic generation largely wiped out, there is a widespread craving for self-expression — and for memories. "Many people still don't know what actually happened during the genocide," he continues. "They try to blame ethnic minorities like the Thai or the Vietnamese. They feel ashamed of being Khmer [the ethnic group native to Cambodia] because of the Khmer Rouge." He pauses. "I have spent much of my life explaining through film it was not Khmer that killed Khmer. I tell them I did not kill my father. Ideology did. Totalitarianism did."

Recalling their first meeting in Phnom Penh, Obarzanek says he was struck by Panh's obsessive attitude to his work. It's an impression that makes sense, given that Panh's best-known film, the 2014 Oscar-nominated *The Missing Picture*, uses narration, archival footage and three-dimensional clay characters and sets to fill in the blanks about his life in Cambodia under Pol Pot. His tableaux of silent, unanimated figurines, painted eyes portraying intense suffering, black garb contrasting with the intense green of the rice fields, speaks volumes.

"I completely understand the pleasure of being able to make and control a sort of parallel world," offers Obarzanek. "Rithy has a day bed in his editing suite [at the Bophana centre] and pretty much lives in there when he's in Cambodia. I imagine he clocks quite incredible hours."

Panh doesn't have a house in Cambodia. In 1990 he returned to find the family home he had shared with his parents and eight siblings occupied by strangers ("I didn't want to go back there anyway"). He smiles when he speaks of his father, a peasant's son who became a teacher, then rose to the position of chief undersecretary of education: "He was passionate about free education, travelling to Paris, New York and Scandinavia to assess their education systems. He was a good man." Another smile. "His students in Cambodia used to bring him apples."

Expelled from the city by the Khmer Rouge, Panh and his family were delivered to a rural village, dressed in black and put to work. Eventually, physically and psychologically exhausted, his father stopped eating ("He chose to die as an act of freedom"). One after another Panh's mother, siblings and relatives died from starvation, overwork, execution. An older sister had been deputy director of the National Museum; she died, her identity effaced, on the killing fields, which are still disgorging the bones and teeth of victims after heavy rains.



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